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ABSTRACT

This issue reviews publications that provide school leaders with guidance in determining how to choose and implement the schoolwide program that is best for their school. American Institutes for Research's "An Educator's Guide to Schoolwide Reform" provides educators with comprehensive profiles and evaluations of 24 of the leading schoolwide programs. Educational Research Service's "Comprehensive Models for School Improvement: Finding the Right Match and Making It Work" offers a valuable resource manual that explains the hows and whys of comprehensive school reform. Thomas K. Glennan's "New American Schools After Six Years" chronicles the successes and failures of the New American Schools after 6 years of implementing schoolwide reform. Policy Study Associates' "Implementing Schoolwide Programs: Volume I, An Idea Book on Planning" outlines the planning process for administrators considering implementing whole-school reform. Eugene C. Schaffer's "Impediments to Reform: An Analysis of Destabilizing Issues in Ten Promising Programs" explores the top 10 impediments to any successful reform effort. (DFR)

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Comprehensive School Reform

Elizabeth Hertling

In a time when education is characterized by scattered, piecemeal reforms, comprehensive reform seems to be the "magic bullet" that promises academic success for all students. Rather than focusing on specific student populations or programs, comprehensive reform seeks to reorganize and revitalize the entire school.

The schoolwide-reform movement has many school districts jumping on board, especially with the incentive of the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program. In 1997, Congress appropriated $150 million for the CSRD, and through these funds almost 3,000 schools nationwide will receive awards of at least $50,000 to implement comprehensive school reform models.

Although comprehensive reform models are many and varied, they share a common focus, such as high standards for all children; they address all academic areas; their programs are research-based and research-tested; their curriculum resources are aligned across grades and subject areas; and they facilitate parent and community involvement.

Comprehensive reform promises sweeping change—and success—but does not come without its problems. Many schools have had difficulties with implementation due to insufficient commitment and resource problems, as well as poorly chosen programs. The works reviewed here provide school leaders with guidance in determining how to choose and implement the schoolwide program that is best for their school.

American Institutes for Research provides educators with comprehensive profiles and evaluations of 24 of the leading schoolwide programs.

Educational Research Service, Inc. offers a valuable resource manual that explains the hows and whys of comprehensive school reform.

Thomas K. Glennan, Jr. chronicles the successes and failures of the New American Schools after six years of implementing schoolwide reform.

Policy Studies Associates, Inc. outlines the planning process for administrators considering implementing whole-school reform.

Eugene C. Schaffer and colleagues explore the top ten impediments to any successful reform effort.

American Institutes for Research. **An Educator's Guide to Schoolwide Reform.** Arlington, Va.: Educational Research Service, Inc., 1999. 141 pages. *Available from:* Educational Research Service, 2000 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201. 703-243-2100. $15.95 plus $3.50 shipping and handling. Web site: **www.ers.org**

Choosing the right schoolwide reform is one of the most difficult choices administrators face. A plethora of programs is available, and it is often difficult for schools to obtain accurate and objective information. This guide may help teachers and administrators reach a decision about whether schoolwide reform is right for their school, and, if so, which approach will best meet their needs. While other reports also discuss various

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schoolwide approaches, this is the only one that rates the approaches based on how well they meet a common set of high standards and compares them with one another in terms of reliable evidence.

Twenty-four comprehensive-reform programs are evaluated in this guide. For each, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) provides the following information: an overview of the program; evidence of positive effects on student achievement; central components of the program; type of support provided by the developer; costs; and contact information. A table shows how the 24 programs compare in positive effects on student achievement, developer support, and costs.

Each program is rated in two different areas—student achievement and developer support—as "strong," "promising," "marginal," or "weak." For student achievement, an additional rating of "no research available" is included. To determine the ratings for student achievement, AIR reviewed studies that reported a broad range of achievement outcomes, studies made available to the public, and changes in test scores reported by the program developers. To determine the ratings for the support that developers provide schools, AIR evaluated access to appropriate types of support, the frequency and duration of that support, and the tools provided to help schools evaluate the implementation process.

AIR advises school leaders to follow seven steps before selecting a schoolwide reform approach:

- Identify the school's needs;
- Investigate alternative approaches;
- Ask questions of the developer;
- Call a random sample of schools using the approach;
- Visit some of those schools whenever possible;
- Match the developer's requirements with available resources; and
- Have your staff vote on the decision.

Educational Research Service, Inc. **Comprehensive Models for School Improvement: Finding the Right Match and Making It Work.** Arlington, Va.: ERS, 1998. 114 pages. *Available from:* Educational Research Service, 2000 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201. 703-243-2100. $30.00 plus $3.50 shipping and handling. Web site: **www.ers.org**

This report from Educational Research Service (ERS) begins with an overview of the comprehensive-reform movement. Educational policy-makers are being increasingly attracted to promising schoolwide designs because of available federal funding and the mixed results of traditional Title I programs.

The report then focuses on how districts can choose the best reform model for their schools. ERS emphasizes the need for self-study. The staff of each school in the district needs to evaluate its strengths and needs, carefully consider the reform options, and build full and active support for the chosen program.

The authors use the analogy of prescribing treatment for a sick person. While penicillin, aspirin, and chemotherapy all are useful cures, they are not appropriate for every patient. Similarly, while some comprehensive reforms strive to improve reading in first graders, others try to foster higher-order thinking in older students. Which program best fits the school's vision, goals, and needs is for the staff to figure out.

The report profiles 17 comprehensive-reform models, describing what each program entails, what resources are available for implementation, what commitments and resources are required for implementation, where the program is now being used, and how to contact program developers.

Choosing a ready-made school-wide-reform program is not the only option. Schools can also design their own programs. The report details important elements such as curriculum and instruction, programs for at-risk students, and family support. ERS cautions schools about expending the time and effort needed to design their own programs without first taking a close look at available existing programs.

Finally, the report discusses how to implement schoolwide reform. Potential problems may arise in several areas: scarcity of resources; lack of parent and community support; leadership problems; and insufficient commitment. ERS suggests ways to avoid some of these problems, such as including parents and the community in the implementation process, and setting clear standards for the program.

Glennan, Jr., Thomas K. **New American Schools After Six Years.** Santa Monica, Cal. RAND Corporation, 1998. 90 pages. *Available from:* RAND Education, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica,CA 90407-2138. 310-393-0411. $15.00 plus $3.00 shipping and handling. Web site: **www.rand.org**

Principals and teachers who are considering comprehensive school reform may find it helpful to turn to research on schools that have already adopted schoolwide designs. This publication describes the evolution of New American Schools (NAS), a nonprofit, private effort to foster significant educational reform. The goal of NAS, established in July 1991, was to develop whole-school designs that would help students reach high educational standards. Glennan examines the program's beginnings and the lessons learned during the first six years of implementation.

There are eight NAS designs. Although each is different, they all articulate the school's vision, mis-

sion, and goals; guide the instructional program; shape the staff; and establish common performance standards for students and teachers.

Originally, NAS emphasized the strength and integrity of the designs themselves, but the leadership quickly realized that success depended on effective implementation of the reforms. This required changing the composition of the design teams to include members skilled in management, marketing, and product refinement.

Glennan chronicles the changes in fiscal and human resources, and in authority structure at the district and state levels, that the NAS designs require. Experience has shown that individual schools need the authority to make these changes to support implementation and advance the professional development of teachers.

Based on the NAS experience, the author cautions schools to be aware of the time and funding required to implement schoolwide designs. NAS researchers found that the design teams worked intensely with schools for three or more years to implement their designs. Schools also must spend considerable time engaging parents and the community, as well as planning and providing professional development. Considerable funding is needed as well—NAS fees may reach $50,000 per school for each of those three years. However, if the school's restructuring succeeds, the reward is a reduction in the divisiveness that often accompanies piecemeal reforms.

Glennan points out that the NAS designs are not solely responsible for a school's success. Other factors, such as leadership, teacher quality, union support, and community support, also play key roles in successful implementation.

About ERIC

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Web site: http://eric.uoregon.edu

Policy Studies Associates, Inc. **Implementing Schoolwide Programs: Volume I, An Idea Book on Planning.** Washington, D.C.: Policy Studies Associates, Inc., 1998. 220 pages. ED 423 615. *Available from:* ERIC Document Reproduction Service, 7420 Fullerton Rd., Suite 110, Springfield, VA 22153-2852. 800-443-3742. $38.97 plus $5.15 shipping and handling. Web site: **www.edrs.com/default.cfm**

This volume highlights resources for planning schoolwide programs and measuring their success. (Volume 2 details specific programs.) The 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) gave schools greater flexibility and resources to undertake whole-school reforms. But meaningful planning procedures and efforts to track school improvement have been sorely lacking in most schoolwide-reform programs, the authors contend. To fill the void, this publication offers many practical suggestions, including checklists and sidebars that help districts comply with the ESEA funding requirements when planning their schoolwide-reform efforts.

Section I discusses the elements and processes of schoolwide programs. Section II gives an overview of the schoolwide planning process. Key elements involved in planning for comprehensive school reform are detailed in Section III. The authors suggest six key steps:

- Establishing a planning team;
- Conducting a comprehensive needs assessment;
- Clarifying needs and identifying research-based strategies;
- Setting schoolwide program goals;
- Writing the plan; and
- Finalizing the plan.

Generally, this planning process takes a full year, and the authors discourage schools from working in isolation, advising them to take advantage of the technical support that is the subject of Section IV. School support teams (SST) are one option. They vary widely from school to school, but may include a core group of teachers and administrators experienced in implementing schoolwide reform, as well as consultants and university experts. A successful SST will include practitioners with diverse experiences that they can apply to many situations. The authors offer examples of actual SSTs and how they functioned.

Section V explores accountability issues. The authors recommend that the implementation process be evaluated at least four times a year, using several measurement strategies. The evaluation should be aligned with the school's objectives and goals. The authors also emphasize the importance of reporting the evaluation results to key stakeholders in the school, such as parents and the community.

Schaffer, Eugene C., and colleagues. **Impediments to Reform: An Analysis of Destabilizing Issues in Ten Promising Programs.** Arlington, Va.: Educational Research Service, Inc., 1997. 17 pages. *Available from:* Educational Research Service, 2000 Clarendon Blvd., Arlington, VA 22201. 703-243-2100. $12.00 plus $3.50 shipping and handling. Web site: **www.ers.org**

This publication identifies and describes specific impediments to

school reform that were previously identified in the study *Special Strategies for Educating Disadvantaged Children*. The ten impediments were found to be widespread within both elementary and secondary schools, and they have the potential to destroy school-reform efforts. By becoming aware of these potential problems, school leaders have the opportunity to either prevent them or cope more effectively with their effects.

Financial problems were reported in the majority of sites studied. Examples included a lack of federal funding and the layoff of teachers and substitutes because of insufficient funds.

Leadership problems sidetracked reforms in several schools. The authors give as examples a principal who did not understand the value of the program, and of teachers and a principal who did not agree on the major elements of the program.

Lack of commitment posed problems as well. Some teachers viewed reforms as fads that would not last, and therefore did not commit themselves fully to implementation.

Public, parent, and student perceptions play an important role in reform. Where parents and students had little knowledge about the reform, they were often unwilling to participate.

Staffing issues also posed a major problem, according to the authors. Teacher recruitment was difficult for some sites, and teachers often did not have the skills needed for the programs, requiring additional professional development.

Curriculum issues could also be an impediment. If the program does not meet the needs of students at the school, or if school- and state-level goals for students differ significantly, reform efforts may suffer.

Political issues can cause problems, particularly if administrators alter or delete programs for political rather than curricular reasons.

Racial conflicts also are a barrier to reform. Examples include divisiveness among staff along racial lines, or principals charged with overt or covert racism.

Facilities posed a problem for some schools in the study that struggled with inadequate buildings and classrooms.

Finally, the authors identify *management and communication issues* as potential impediments to reform. If there are problems managing students, or if communication among staff members is poor, reform may not be implemented fully. □

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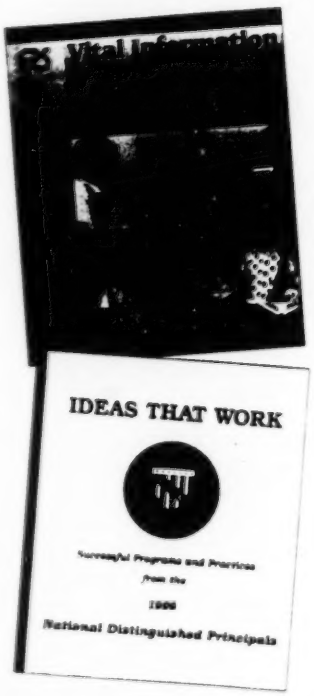

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